



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS

OFFICE OF COURT CONSTRUCTION
AND MANAGEMENT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: COURTHOUSE CONSTRUCTION COSTS

1. What are the average construction costs for an AOC courthouse project?

\$587 per square foot. This figure is the average construction budget for the 41 projects to be funded under SB 1407. This average includes budgets for 36 new courthouses, 3 renovation projects, and 2 projects that involve both renovation and expansion.

The figure includes basic construction and miscellaneous construction costs related to security, data, and communication. It excludes escalation, soft costs (such as architectural and engineering design) parking garages, land acquisition, and furniture, fixtures, and equipment. The construction budget per square foot for each of these projects is posted on the California Courts website.

This average is only slightly more than a recently bid and completed example: The March 2009 bid price for the New East Contra Costa Courthouse was **\$520 per square foot**.

2. Why is a much higher cost-per-square-foot figure sometimes cited?

Most dollar-per-square foot figures in the industry reflect **construction costs only**. For full transparency, the AOC reports **total project budgets**, which include far more than construction.

3. How does the AOC calculate its courthouse project budgets?

Beyond construction, the AOC's full project budgets also include:

- a. The cost of land and costs related to land acquisition, such as appraisals, title exams, environmental impact studies, and legal fees.
- b. Soft costs, such as architectural and engineering design and project management.
- c. An estimated cost of escalation over time. We currently budget construction cost escalation at 5 percent per year, to the midpoint of a construction. Because escalation represents such a significant element of overall cost, it is inappropriate to compare raw construction costs from projects completed several years ago with those planned for the future without applying an escalation factor.

Certain elements of project costs can vary widely depending on location. Land costs vary widely in California markets. Construction materials and labor costs at prevailing wage also vary by locale.

Frequently Asked Questions: Courthouse Construction Costs

4. Are federal courthouses cheaper to build?

No. Here are examples based on recently published figures for construction-only costs per square foot:

Bakersfield federal courthouse (1 courtroom, completion scheduled for 2012): **\$853**

San Diego federal courthouse (14 courtrooms, completion scheduled for 2013): **\$702**

5. What are the differences in a state courthouse project vs. a federal courthouse project?

State trial courthouses typically have more courtrooms and holding cells per square foot than federal courthouses. Courtrooms and holding cells are more expensive to build than office space.

Federal courthouses often have significantly more office space for court-related and other agencies. The Judicial Council's California Trial Court Facilities Standards for specific spaces are generally smaller—more efficient—than the US. Courts Design Guide for the same types of spaces.

Therefore, while the planned California state courts have relatively **more expensive space types**—more courtrooms and holding cells—they are **more efficient**—their construction costs less per square foot.

6. Why are courthouses more expensive than other buildings?

These are complex buildings with sophisticated requirements that make them more expensive than typical commercial buildings.

The goal of the California judicial branch's current building program is to provide **safe, secure, and accessible courthouses** with more and better functional space suited to the range of services needed in today's state trial courts. Spaces must accommodate a variety of case types, some of them high-traffic spaces such as traffic court and arraignment court; secure holding facilities; and three distinct circulation systems—separate hallways for the public, staff, and in-custody defendants; appropriate spaces for juvenile and family law (including a children's waiting room); self-help space; and public service windows.

Mandatory security systems and technology in these facilities are more costly than the typical commercial building. **We're also building structures to last** at least 50 years; 100 years with periodic renewal and ongoing upkeep. Building materials have to be of a quality that can be maintained and will last over time, given heavy use by the public.

California building is expensive. Seismic requirements, building codes, and energy conservation requirements are unseen drivers of cost.

Frequently Asked Questions: Courthouse Construction Costs

7. What kind of oversight does the judicial branch's \$6.4 billion construction program receive?

The Judicial Council maintains oversight of the judicial branch facilities program at a policy level, approves project prioritization, and each year reviews and adopts an update to the trial court capital-outlay plan. Each AOC courthouse project also receives extensive oversight from both the executive and legislative branches. To receive authorization to begin each project funded by Senate Bill 1407, the AOC submitted a detailed feasibility report for review by both the legislative and executive branches. These reports analyzed the underlying need and options for meeting that need (such as remodeling existing space versus new construction) and detailed a scope of work, budget, and schedule for the recommended project. These studies were thoroughly reviewed by staff of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, the Department of Finance (DOF), and the Legislative Analyst's Office. Neither agency withheld approval for any project.

Initial approval is only the beginning of oversight. AOC staff review these projects quarterly with DOF, and there are numerous other approvals that each project undergoes, with both the executive branch and the legislature, as it proceeds through site acquisition, design, and construction.

In addition, the AOC must certify that there are adequate funds in the designated accounts for completing each project and the entire program on an ongoing basis.

For more information, contact:

Teresa Ruano, AOC Office of Communications: teresa.ruano@jud.ca.gov
415-865-7447